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ABSTRACT

Differences between American and Japanese society and culture that contribute to differences in the use of body language are examined. These include historical and social factors. Examples of the differences and of the misunderstandings that can result are analyzed and illustrated, using a system of classifying kinesic codes into categories according to function. Suggestions are made for teaching kinesic codes in English-as-a-second-language instruction to promote better intercultural communication. (A five-page reference list is appended.) (MSE)

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Kinesic Codes

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Differences in the Kinesic Codes  
of Americans and Japanese  
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## Abstract

In this paper, we will consider the subdivision of nonverbal communication called kinesics. Kinesics can be defined as body movement, including various types of gestures and facial expressions but excluding touch.

Studies of kinesics done before World War II were generally done within one culture and were based on the assumption that the same gestures had the same meaning in other cultures. However, contemporary scholars agree that much nonverbal meaning is learned rather than natural.

Because kinesic codes play an important part in communication, they can cause misunderstanding between people of different cultures. Due to differences in American and Japanese cultures, Americans and Japanese use kinesic codes quite differently. In this paper, we will discuss some of the differences between American and Japanese society and culture that contribute to differences in their use of kinesic codes and suggest ways in which kinesic codes can be taught in English classes in Japan to promote better communication between Americans and Japanese.

### Differences in the Kinesic Codes of Americans and Japanese

Scholars who study communication among members of different cultures have come to agree that the study of intercultural communication is incomplete without the consideration of meaning conveyed by nonverbal means (Ramsey, 1979).

In this paper, we are considering the particular subdivision of nonverbal communication called kinesics. Kinesics can be defined as body movement, including various types of gestures and facial expressions but excluding touch.

#### The Study of Kinesics

Before World War II, the study of kinesics largely ignored cross cultural differences. Studies that were done up to that time were generally done within one culture and were based on the assumption that the same gestures had the same meaning in other cultures (Jensen, 1985). These studies asserted or implied that body movements and gestures were instinctive and biologically determined and therefore did not vary among cultures. However, contemporary scholars agree that most nonverbal meaning is learned rather than natural (LaBarre, 1947). (One of the exceptions is expression of emotion, at least

some of which seem to be universal [Ekman and Friesen, 1969].)

Kinesic codes play an important part in any communication. Because of their importance, they can be the cause of misunderstanding between people of different cultures. Due to differences in American and Japanese cultures, Americans and Japanese use kinesic codes quite differently. In this paper, we will discuss some of the differences between American and Japanese society and culture that contribute to differences in their use of kinesic codes. Using Ekman and Friesen's system of classifying kinesic codes, we will give examples of these differences and the misunderstandings they can cause when Japanese and Americans attempt to communicate. Last, we will discuss how kinesic codes can be taught in English classes in Japan to promote better communication between Americans and Japanese.

#### Factors Affecting Use of Kinesic Codes

##### Historical Factors

There are three important historical factors that influence the ways in which the Japanese use kinesic codes.

The Tokugawa Period, 1603 to 1687. For over 250 years, the Japanese were ruled by a highly centralized,

authoritarian military government. Hearn (1904) described nonverbal behavior during that period. He wrote that the nonverbal behavior of the masses of people was strictly regulated, including the degree of smile a person should show when taking an order from a superior. An elaborate code of deportment was developed. Not only did the code require that any anger or pain be hidden but that opposite feeling should be expressed. Samurai women were required to express joy when hearing that their husbands or sons had been killed in battle. No natural expression of grief was allowed. This strict code is obviously no longer enforced. However, philosophically, it still has a great influence on the public behavior of the Japanese in that they still rarely show their emotions in public and tend to hide negative emotions. The "poker face" is still the ideal (Morsbach, 1976). This is discussed in more detail in the section about examples of differences in affective expressions.

Homogeneity. All of the mass immigrations to Japan took place before about 500 A.D. The small number of immigrants that have come in the 1400 years since then have been, for the most part, absorbed into the larger population. (The major exceptions to this are Koreans who were brought to Japan during World War II and a relatively

small number of Southeast Asians and Westerners.) In addition, Japan was isolated from the outside world for more than 250 years during the Tokugawa Period. During this time, Japan's culture developed entirely without the influences of the outside world. The cultural and racial uniformity that resulted from these two situations have, in part, resulted in a country of over 100 million that is the most homogeneous modern nation of its size. The people therefore are able to communicate with relatively few words and depend on the shared knowledge and nonverbal codes to help them communicate their full meaning, and to use nonverbal codes to communicate meanings that they are not acceptable to verbalize (Morsbach, 1976; Ting-Toomey, 1985).

Hall (1976) differentiated between high context cultures and low context cultures. In a high context culture, most of the information is contained in the context, and relatively little of it needs to be coded. In a low context culture, less of the information is contained in the context, and more must be coded. Hall classified Japanese culture as a high context culture and American culture as a low context culture. This indicates that Japanese tend to rely more on meaning included in the situation or nonverbal communication than meaning coded

verbally, and Americans rely more on meaning coded verbally.

Zen Buddhism. Another important historical factor is the influence of Zen Buddhism. Though historically, the majority of Japanese have never practiced Zen, it was adopted by the influential samurai classes between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and became the basis for their code of conduct. This became the ideal for many who belonged to the lower classes. Certain aspects of Zen are still influential throughout Japanese society. Zen teachings place a great deal of emphasis on understanding through nonverbal means. In Zen teachings, a large part--often the essential part--is left unsaid (Morsbach, 1976).

### Social Factors

Parent-Child Relationships. Observations of mother-child interactions in Japanese families and in American families indicated that Japanese mothers had significantly less vocal interaction and more bodily contact with their infants than American mothers (Caudill and Weinstein, 1969). Japanese mothers, as a rule, would pick up their infants almost as soon as they began crying, until the babies went to sleep. In contrast, American mothers would let their children cry until they fell asleep. As Morsbach (1976) pointed out, American mothers seem to



foster independence in their children, while Japanese mothers tend to foster dependence. American mothers create a physical distance between themselves and their children and bridge that gap through verbal communication; Japanese mothers keep their children close to themselves and are able to communicate nonverbally.

Intragroup Relationships. Japanese generally think of themselves as being members, first of all, of a group. As Hazama (1982: 12) writes, "In American society, the central social value is considered to be individualism. In Japan, however, the corresponding value that forms the nexus of society is groupism." Reischauer (1977), one of the foremost American authorities on Japan, considers attitude toward the group as being the single most significant difference between Japanese and American culture.

For most women, their primary group is their family, especially their children. For most men, the main groups are the company where they work and the family, though they spend the greatest amount of time with the group at the company. The group is most important, and Japanese people are likely to have relatively few important contacts outside of the group. This means that group interactions are particularly intense and group members

know each other exceptionally well. As Nakane (1970) pointed out, this high degree of involvement in interpersonal relationships may cause a highly developed system of postures and expressions that used to avoid confrontation and conceal hostility in these close relationships.

Within groups, decisions are often made through reaching a consensus. This is a long, drawn out process in which group members talk around the subject of the decision, sounding out one another's positions, until they can arrive at a decision that everyone in the group can agree with (Gibney, 1975). During this process, group members try to decode other members' nonverbal behavior to find out what their true positions are, since group members do not necessarily state their positions openly.

Avoiding Restricted Subjects. Like members of any other culture, the Japanese have certain subjects that they do not like to discuss verbally. There are numerous restrictions on what a person is allowed to comment on. Japanese often get around this by using kinesic codes. For example, it is impolite to mention money, but a Japanese can use a gesture (a circle formed by the thumb and forefinger, similar to the American gesture for "OK") to communicate the concept of "money".



O.K. (American) or money (Japanese)

Distrust of Verbalization. Due to the various historical factors mentioned in the previous section, the Japanese have come to have a distrust of verbalization, making nonverbal communication particularly important. As Kunihiro (1976: 56) writes,

To the Japanese, language is a means of communication, whereas to the people of many other cultures, it is the means. Japanese tend to be taciturn, considering it a virtue to say little and rely on nonlinguistic means to convey the rest....Even Japanese who have a good command of a foreign language reveal these tendencies in that language. They assume that the other fellow "understands without my saying it"....

Kunihiro goes on to state that Japan is an endogamous society, meaning that the members share so many of the aspects of their daily life and consciousness that they develop the kind of intuitive nonverbal communication that family members living under the same roof have.

Because they distrust verbalization, the Japanese tend to be generally more sensitive to nonverbal communication than Americans (Condon, 1984). As Condon points out, this can cause difficulties between Americans and Japanese. A Japanese may feel that he/she was communicating, for example, dissatisfaction, by nonverbal means. However, an American may not feel that he/she should be expected to know about the dissatisfaction unless it was put into words.

#### Some Specific Examples

Ekman and Friesen (1969) have developed a system for classifying kinesics into categories according to function. Their six categories were:

1. emblems: nonverbal acts with a direct verbal translation, usually displayed deliberately
2. illustrators: nonverbal acts directly tied to, and meaningless without, speech
3. affect displays: expressions of emotion
4. regulators: nonverbal acts that maintain and regulate turn-taking
5. adaptors: nonverbal acts that are intended to meet emotional needs

We will consider examples of similarities and differences in each of these areas.

### Emblems

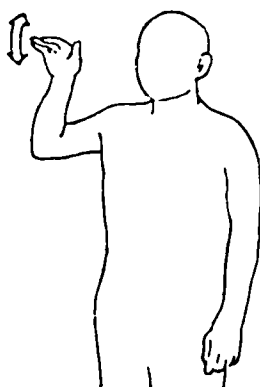
The kinesic code on which the greatest amount of research has been done, perhaps because it is the most obvious, is that of emblems. Researchers have found both similarities and differences in the ways that Americans and Japanese use emblems.

Some emblems that the Japanese use are readily understood by Americans. For example, a circling motion with the forefinger near the temple indicates that the person being discussed is crazy. Also, an extended forefinger placed against the lips is the emblem for, "Be quiet." This type of emblem does not generally cause any misunderstanding between Japanese and Americans.

Some emblems are confusing because they resemble emblems that have different meanings for Americans. As mentioned above, the emblem that means money to a Japanese means OK to an American. In certain contexts, these two emblems may be confused. In one case, an American and Japanese wanted to make arrangements to meet some friends. The American called from a pay phone, and signaled to the Japanese, using the American emblem for "OK" that the friends would be able to meet them. The Japanese interpreted the emblem as meaning that more coins were needed for the pay phone and rushed over to put in more

money. (To add to the confusion, the American meaning has also been adopted by some Japanese, so that even among themselves, Japanese may have confusion over the meaning of this emblem.)

Another emblem that appears similar but has a different meaning, and therefore is confusing for American and Japanese communicating with each other, is the emblem that means come here. The Japanese emblem is performed with the arm stretched out, the palm down, and the fingers flicking. The appearance is similar to the American gesture for go away, leading to confusion, especially if the context is not clear.



Come here (Japanese)

Another example is a thumb extended from the fist. This "thumbs up" sign indicates agreement for Americans, but for Japanese, it refers to a father, patron, or gang

leader (Seward, 1968).

Some emblems used by Japanese are completely unfamiliar to Americans. The little finger pointed straight up is used to refer to a girlfriend, wife or mistress. It is used when the speaker does not want to mention or guess the relationship between the hearer and a certain woman.



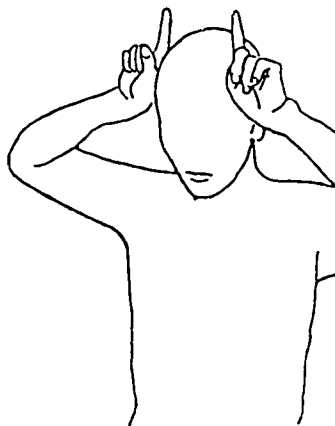
Girlfriend, wife or mistress (Japanese)

When Japanese wants to refuse something that is offered, they usually wave one hand back and forth rapidly in front of their faces.



No, thank you. (Japanese)

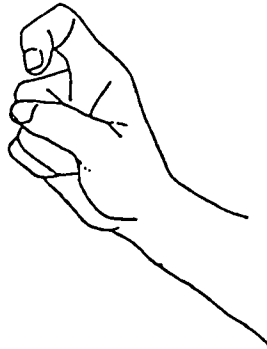
Another emblem that has no equivalent American emblem is oni (demon). The two forefingers extended and placed alongside the head indicate a demon, and, by extension, anger (see Appendix). A wife is not allowed to comment verbally on her husband's anger, but she may use this gesture to indicate that he is angry.



Demon (angry) (Japanese)

There are two other common emblems that are used to communicate meanings that could not be communicated verbally. One is the crooked index finger (see Appendix), which indicates that the person in question is a thief ("hooking" onto things that do not belong to him/her).





Thief (Japanese)

The other is licking the tip of the little finger and brushing it over the eyebrow, which indicates that the person in question is a liar.

Bowing is a very important part of Japanese interpersonal communication. The Japanese bow to show respect in a wide variety of situations. The Japanese bow when greeting, when making a request, when apologizing, when acknowledging another person's presence or actions, when congratulating, and when leave-taking.

While the basic meaning of the bow is not difficult for Americans to understand, the rules associated with bowing are complex and difficult for outsiders to completely master. In general, when people are bowed to, they bow in return, though there are exceptions to this rule. (Doctors, for example, do not return bows of nurses while doing their rounds, and customers do not return bows

of clerks when walking through department stores.) The relative status of the people involved determines the depth and angle of the bow and the number of repetitions necessary. The social inferior bows more deeply, and the superior decides when to stop bowing. This can be a delicate matter among people who are of nearly the same status, because there is no clear superior and because both want to be polite. They often engage in what Morsbach (1976) calls a "bowing contest" or "one-downsmanship" in which each tries to outdo the other in the politeness of their bow.

Bowing is so automatic and ingrained that Japanese can be seen bowing to their conversational partner when talking on the telephone. One of the authors of this paper bows when speaking Japanese on the telephone, but not English. He did not realize that he did this until it was pointed out to him.

Japanese generally do not expect Americans to know the complex rules for bowing. It is rare for foreigners to totally master bowing (LaFrance and Mayo, 1978). However, if a Japanese bows to an American, and the American does not respond with a bow, the Japanese will be embarrassed and unsure how to behave. Japanese and Americans in social situations in Japan sometimes

compromise by shaking hands and bowing at the same time, which can be awkward.

### Illustrators

As far as we were able to find, there is no research on the differences between use of illustrators by Americans and Japanese, and no anecdotal evidence related to differences. However, it is our impression that Japanese generally use illustrators less in normal conversation. This may be because they do not value the type of dynamism that frequent use of illustrators might add to the verbal stream. Another reason is that the Japanese language is inherently vague (Matsumoto, 1976), and receivers are willing to accept more ambiguity.

### Affect Displays

Though some researchers feel that at least some ways of expressing emotions are universal (Ekman and Friesen, 1969), there are certainly differences in the ways that they are used in different cultures. The different ways that emotions are expressed in a culture are said to be governed by display rules, a concept originally developed by Klineberg (1940). Display rules are culturally learned and tell members of a culture what emotions are acceptable to express under what circumstances. Display rules dictate whether an emotion should be qualified (have

another expression added to it), modulated (intensified or deintensified) or falsified (replaced by an unfelt emotion) (Ekman and Friesen, 1975).

The display rules for American culture allow Americans to express their emotions in public more than Japanese do, though, of course, there are sex differences here, and not all emotions are acceptable for American to express. The Japanese have a greater tendency to hide their emotions, especially negative emotions, usually through falsification. Friesen (1972) found that American and Japanese subjects showed similar affect when viewing a stressful film alone but that Japanese subjects showed less affect than Americans when viewing a stressful film with peers. This appears to indicate that the Japanese have display rules against expressing emotions in public.

In American culture, smiling is thought to convey pleasure, enjoyment, and occasionally nervousness or embarrassment. While smiling can be used in these ways by Japanese, too, it is also very commonly used to express discomfort, embarrassment, shyness, surprise, and so on. The Japanese often smile, particularly when speaking to a superior, to hide whatever emotions they may have underneath (Tada, 1972).

A smile may also be used to hide more negative

emotions such as anger and grief, even if those emotions are perfectly natural and acceptable. Seward (1968) cites an example of a Japanese maid who smiled when asking her American employer for time off to attend her husband's funeral, and later laughed when pointing out the urn that contained her husband's ashes. The American, not surprisingly, considered these expressions of emotion strange and callous, but to a Japanese, such concealment of emotion is heroic. This tendency to hide even what might be considered natural emotions sometimes causes difficulty in communication. Americans may assume that the fact that Japanese do not show emotions indicates that they do not feel any, that they are uncaring, unfeeling or cruel (LaFrance and Mayo, 1978), and this has the potential to cause serious misunderstandings.

Regulators. As with illustrators, there does not appear to be any research about the differences in the way Japanese and American use regulators. However, there is some speculation and anecdotal evidence on these differences and the problems they cause.

Eye contact is an important as a regulator in conversations between Americans and, for example, it may be severely decreased in an attempt to terminate a conversation (Knapp, 1978). Since Japanese use much less

eye contact than Americans--they are taught to look in the general area of the speaker's Adam's apple (Morsbach, 1976)--Americans may interpret the lack of eye contact, among other things, as a desire to terminate the conversation.

Another difference between Japanese and American conversation is that the Japanese are more comfortable with silence and believe that they can communicate in silence. For Americans, this silence may be uncomfortable or may seem to indicate a lack of comprehension. Instead of watching for nonverbal cues that would indicate what the Japanese person is trying to communicate, or cues that would indicate that he/she is formulating a verbal answer, Americans tend to try to explain the point or ask the question again.

The meaning that nodding has in the two cultures is also different. Americans generally nod during a conversation when they agree or wish to give the impression that they agree. When Japanese nod, this may indicate agreement, but it does not necessarily. If a Japanese is nodding when an American is speaking, the American will probably assume that the listener is agreeing. This may not be the case (LaFrance and Mayo, 1978). Nodding may be intended to indicate sympathy,

admiration, or simply comprehension, without indicating agreement. Many American businesspeople have assumed that nodding meant yes and have continued their conversation on this assumption. They have later been surprised to find later that the Japanese did not agree with any of their proposals (Tada, 1972).

### Adaptors

There is also little research related to differences in uses of adaptors between Americans and Japanese. Pucel and Stocker (1982) did a study using self-reports from groups of American and Japanese participants on stress behaviors in response to communication apprehension in public speaking situations. They found that Americans reported using self- and object-adaptors more frequently than Japanese did (25% of the American respondents vs. 9% of the Japanese respondents) and also reported avoiding eye contact more often than Japanese did (25% vs. 13%). While the researchers admit that these differences may have been caused by the fact that American students had more experience in public speaking and therefore more self awareness, the difference in use of adaptors in particular is interesting. (Since Japanese use less eye contact to begin with, they may not be able to decrease their eye contact very much in response to communication

apprehension.) Possibly Japanese use fewer adaptors in an effort to keep their nervousness from being obvious. Or, as mentioned above, it may be that they are just less aware of the adaptors that might "give away" their nervousness.

An adaptor used by Japanese women that is not common among American women is the covering of the mouth in awkward situations. We could not find any studies that mentioned it, but it is something that we have both observed very frequently. The origin and purpose of this gesture are not clear, though it seems to be used to hide embarrassment.

#### Teaching Kinesics in the English Class in Japan

In recent years, achieving communicative competence in a second or foreign language is a goal that has received considerable attention. Though researchers do not agree on the percentage of a message carried through nonverbal channels, language teachers are coming to realize that efforts to achieve communicative competence must include nonverbal competence in the target language (Fitch, 1985; Waltman, 1984)). In this part of the paper, we will consider the teaching on nonverbal communication in English classes in Japan from two points of view: encoding and decoding kinesics in interaction and kinesics



in literature.

### Decoding and Encoding Kinesics

Many language learners do not have an awareness of the breadth and importance of nonverbal communication. For many students, nonverbal communication will mean gestures and nothing more (Waltman, 1984). It is important that teachers help students become conscious of the fact that nonverbal communication means much more than that.

One important step in learning about nonverbal communication is having an understanding of the target culture itself. While not all nonverbal communication is a logical outgrowth of the culture where it developed, some of it is, so understanding the culture will help in understanding nonverbal communication. For example, understanding something about the hierarchical nature of Japanese society would give a foreigner some understanding of the conventions related to bowing.

Since a teacher cannot reasonably expect to cover everything students should know about kinesics, Waltman (1984) suggests how priorities might be established. Emblems are an easy place to start, since they are easy to teach and since some of them will overlap between Japanese and American cultures. The first priority might be to

teach emblems that have a negative meaning in the target culture. For example, the emblem that Japanese use for refusal (waving the hand back and forth quickly in front of the face) is offensive to some Americans, and Japanese should be advised to avoid using it. The second priority might be to teach more positive emblems, emphasizing which emblems are similar to the ones Americans use and which ones are different.

Another area that Japanese students should be taught about is eye contact. As mentioned above, Americans use eye contact more often and more intensely than Japanese do. Americans are likely to think that a person who avoids eye contact is disrespectful, deceitful, submissive, or uninterested, though too direct a gaze might be interpreted as indicating a challenge or sexual invitation (Fitch, 1985). Japanese should learn to increase their eye contact when speaking English, while not "overdoing it" and should have opportunities to practice appropriate eye contact.

Fitch (1985) emphasizes that nonverbal communication does not necessarily have to be taught separately from verbal communication, that students, in fact, benefit from the interaction of the two. She suggests a number of activities that might be used to stimulate awareness and

knowledge of nonverbal codes. The most useful is role playing, an activity already widely used in language teaching. The role plays that a teacher already uses might be expanded to include various areas of nonverbal communication. For example, in a role play of an interaction between an American professor and a student, eye contact might be emphasized, since the Japanese student's impulse will be to avoid eye contact in order to show respect, a behavior that might be interpreted negatively by an American professor. Illustrators are another category of kinesic code that might be emphasized in role play, since Japanese seem to avoid using illustrators and may need to learn to be more specific and concrete when speaking English than they normally are in Japanese.

### Kinesics in Literature

Some Japanese students will rarely if ever have contact with native English speakers outside of the classroom, so learning to use kinesics in interaction will not be particularly useful to them. However, they may read books in English, and, as Kobayashi (1975) has noted, the many references to kinesic codes in books written in English can be a barrier to the understanding of a Japanese reader, since, first, the reader may not

understand the description of the body movement, and second, the reader may not understand the significance that that movement has for native English speakers. However, it is not enough that the Japanese reader learn the vocabulary for different body movements. It is also necessary for him/her to learn the significance of those body movements.

In a series of articles, Kobayashi (1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1983d, 1984a, 1984b) gives a number of examples of this, including emblems, illustrators, affect displays, and adaptors, from a wide variety of different books.

1. Mr. Goodwin appeared in the inner doorway and crooked his finger at me. (The Chill by Ross MacDonald)
2. Reagan's response was to cross the fingers of one hand above his head... (Time, Nov. 21, 1980)
3. "A pretty girl?" He demonstrated what he meant with his hands. (The Beethoven Medal by K.M. Peyton)
4. "How much (will it cost)?" "Five hundred." Howell didn't blink. (The Galton Case by Ross MacDonald)
5. Mary, clinching her hands, dug her nails into her palms in order to force herself to speak naturally. (Up at the Flat by Joan Lingard)
6. Henry shuffled his feet, looked at her, shuffled his feet again, picked his nose, and rubbed his left ear.

"Just something I--I wondered if you--I mean--if you wouldn't mind my asking you--". (Postern of Fate by Agatha Christie)

An American reader would most likely have no difficulty recognizing that the emblem Reagan used in Example #2 indicated a wish for good luck, that Howell's not blinking in Example #4 indicated that he was not surprised, that the adaptors Henry used in Example #6 indicated that he was exceedingly nervous. However, a Japanese reader unfamiliar with the kinesic codes that Americans use would not be likely to understand the implications of any of these examples and therefore may miss some of the writer's intended meaning.

Kobayashi does not give any suggestions for solving this problem. However, it seems obvious that if uses of the kinesic code are pointed out to students when they encounter them in reading assignments, this will increase their understanding of the text. Also, teachers might consider teaching students common parts of the kinesic code, so that they will recognize them and understand them when they encounter them.

### Conclusion

Nonverbal communication plays an important part in communication as a whole. When the communicators come

from different cultures, with different rules for nonverbal communication, there is a great deal of potential for misunderstanding. Because of a variety of historical and social factors, Japanese and Americans have developed different systems of nonverbal communication and different attitudes toward verbal and nonverbal communication.

Because of these differences, it is important for Americans and Japanese to have some understanding of one another's nonverbal codes and attitudes toward verbal and nonverbal communication. As English teachers in Japan, we feel that one important place for Japanese to learn about nonverbal communication with Americans is in the language classroom.

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